

Bundy Pleads Case For Backgrounders

By Luther A. Huston

CPYRGHT

The power and influence of the press would be greatly enhanced if editors and reporters were less preoccupied with "firsts" and "leads" and would prize "readers more and headlines less", McGeorge Bundy, former assistant to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, told the annual meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors here April 20.

Bundy, who is president of the Ford Foundation, did not denigrate the value of "background" reporting under proper rules and he praised thoughtful "news of analysis." But, he said, "the most remarkable single fact about the men of talent in the rising press is that so many of them, even in 1967, would rather break a story than understand it."

The Press and the Presidency

Bundy's topic was "Reading It More and Enjoying It Less", a phrase once used by President Kennedy. He began by discussing the relations between the press and the Presidency, which he said involves a "natural conflict of interest." His concern was the use made by reporters of information obtained from subordinates of the President. It was this type of story he was "reading more and enjoying less."

He was not sharply critical of reporters for digging out the information from whatever source available but he said that the subordinate who used "the power-position of his boss against his boss" engaged in "political theft." A President or a Secretary, he asserted, was entitled to "the public support of his staff." An administration, he declared, "has every right to speak to the press with one voice."

The Lindley Rule

Several years ago, Ernest K. Lindley, while President of Overseas Writers, laid down the rule that stories about speeches to that organization must not be attributed to the speaker or to the occasion. Known as the "Lindley Rule" it has provided guidance for reporters in countless off-the-record interviews and meetings.

Bundy said some of the trouble

between the press and public officials resulted from "the near-disappearance of the old Lindley rule."

"That rule said that you could use — as your own — whatever you heard from an official who was talking on a not-for-attribution basis," Bundy said. "The trouble with the Lindley rule is that it prevents hard hot stories — and hard hot stories have become the name of the game. So over the last 15 years that rule has gradually faded into the background simply because it rarely generates stories that editors put on front pages. In its place we have the greatest guessing game on earth — in which the editors always know, the government usually knows — and the public seldom knows what is going on. Could there be a more startling reversal of the purpose of a free press?"

Officials, Bundy asserted, deserve the right of precise reporting of what they say. But they also have the right to the Lindley rule. Reporters do not have to accept it — they can leave the room — but the official "has the right to impose it for those who will play."

"The Lindley rule, after all, says simply that there are things an official knows which a reporter can properly learn and discuss — always using his own judgment as he goes — without involving the official in any

way, shape or form," Bundy said.

"It goes without saying that the reporter has a right to his own judgment in the things he reports by the Lindley rule. That fact, indeed, together with the fantastic expansion of the press corps is reason for the general weakening of that rule. Today, if you apply the Lindley rule (no attribution at all) with 10 reporters, you have a 50-50 chance that it will hold. If you try to apply it with 50, you have no chance at all (at least not in Washington — New York is less tough). And if you try to misapply it — if you try to give out news that is too hot for the rule to handle — you have no chance at all with an audience larger than one."

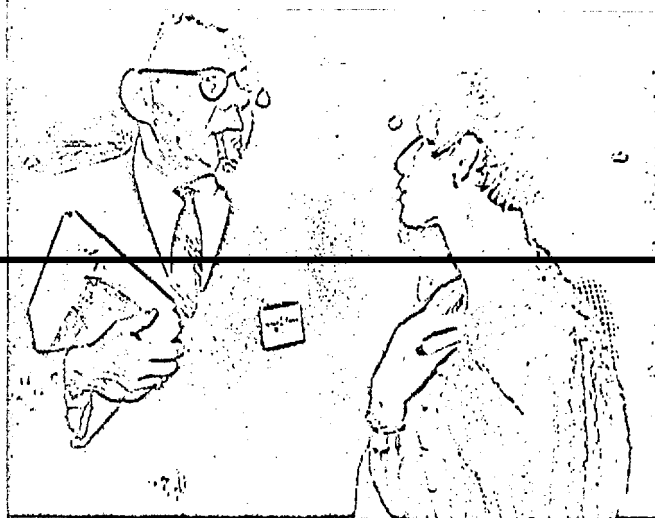
"The reasons for this inexorable pressure against the Lindley rule are something you will understand better than I. Pressed for an explanation, I would say

that it is mostly the reporter's professional zeal that has made the trouble. First, the reporter resents the acceptance of responsibility for citing another man's views as his own. He'd rather not print them than give them an authority — his own — that he does not feel. But, second, he must not let others beat him out, and if the author of the backgrounder is a big man in town, the story will surely run in a rival sheet. So he has to say something. What?

"It is from this agonizing question — asked by dozens of able men every day — that we see the development of all kinds of modified backgrounders. Not all of them are bad. When there are complex technical details — as on a budget message or a tax bill — the anonymous official expert is indispensable. And I can see a good clear daily role — easily understood by all — in the routine 'White House spokesman' or 'State Department official.' We all know who they are and whom they speak for. We even know why they need some anonymity."

"It is the floaters that cause the confusion. Who is 'Embassy sources' when there are more than a hundred? Who is 'Government Officials'? If you, as an editor, know that means a Cabinet Officer, and I as a reader do not, then who is confusing whom?

"For myself, I prefer that splendidly invisible informant, the figure in the following shrouded sentence. 'It was learned last night that the government was about to commit another mistake before this fact was learned last night.' This sentence, indeed, has all the beauty of a classic rondo. It goes out where it came in — all sources are protected — no



SEE YOU LATER, DEAR—Arthur Z. Kamin, editor of the Red Bank (N.J.) Register, has a few last words with his wife before he goes to an ASNE meeting and she joins the ladies for a Washington tour.



IT PAYS TO ADVERTISE, especially in E&P, says Herbert G. Klein, editor of the Coaley-owned San Diego Union, showing the pages of the magazine to Mr. and Mrs. William J. Woodruff, of Houston.